

A Good Summer for White Deer Plaza Merchants But Covid-19 Concerns Return with Onset of Colder Weather

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SPARTA, N.J. - Lake Mohawk is a private community in Northwest New Jersey that was established in 1926. Its founders envisioned something akin to a small Swiss hamlet, surrounded by hills, lakes and forests. The rural Sussex County location, just fifty miles outside New York City, was chosen to provide a "respite from urban living."



part in Sparta and part in Byram Township.

Lake Mohawk, the New Jersey community's largest lake, located

White Deer Plaza, located on the northern end of the community's largest lake, is home to a variety of businesses. Indeed, in normal times, when you arrive in the plaza it feels like you have been transported back in time and far from any city, with locals and visitors buzzing in and out of buildings still defined by their original Swiss chalet design.



White Deer Plaza, Lake Mohawk, Sparta, New Jersey

Normal times evaporated with the arrival of the pandemic, which significantly slowed commercial activity in the plaza from March to June of this year. While businesses reported a return to 2019 business levels over the warm summer, colder weather on the horizon has rekindled concerns as to how the virus could still wreak havoc on those same businesses.

During interviews about the impact of Covid-19 on their businesses, conducted live in their plaza stores on September 11, three owners echoed three common themes.

First, survival was driven by loyal customers. "Our customers made a concerted effort to support our businesses, without which we would not have survived," Kathryn Kaplan said. "The plaza is important to our residents. They want to see it prosper." Kaplan owns both Garlic & Oil, a gourmet food and gift shop, and Ava and Jack Children's Boutique, a high-end clothing shop.

At Casa Mia, a pizzeria, its owner provided a more specific example of customer support. "After not being around for a few months, a long-time customer came in to pick up his order in early June, telling us to charge him for three pizzas," Mike Pugliese said, with a slight Italian accent and a cracking voice. "But the customer only ordered two pies."

"I'm only open because of my customers," George Caccavale, the energetic 52 year-old owner of the White Deer Liquor Store said. The personal nature of those relationships becomes evident as his customers are greeted upon entry with casual forms of their first names. During our interview, Johnny, Joey and Matty paid a visit.

A second common observation was that warm weather played an important role in bringing customers to the plaza. In fact, [July was the hottest month on record](#) in New Jersey since that statistic was first officially recorded in 1865. Nature takes, and nature provides.

Finally, imminent colder weather brings heightened uncertainty to all. "In a normal year, business gets slower when it gets darker earlier in the day," Pugliese said. "Who knows what that is going to mean this fall with the pandemic."

"The fear for the future is that in both stores we have purchased holiday product and ramped up holiday food," Kaplan said. "If we have to close again, we most likely will close for good."

While these businesses shared some common experiences, the impact of the pandemic on their respective businesses has varied.

When stepping into Kaplan's stores, one gains a sense of premium products, whether an incredibly smooth, pungent and delicious wedge of brie cheese at Garlic & Oil, or a dazzling new dress for your four-year-old daughter at Ava & Jack. Now bustling with activity, it is difficult to tell that the stores were closed for over two months.

Both businesses suffered during the shutdown, not just because of lost sales, but because of lost inventory. Ava & Jack was a worst-case scenario, as it had to order inventory before March for the then upcoming spring season. Kaplan had to write-off most of that inventory because fashion lines change annually. With Garlic & Oil, where food items are purchased on a rolling basis, Kaplan was better able to minimize inventory levels, although some products were donated by Kaplan to the Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry due to expiration dates that came due while the store was closed. In August, the both stores recorded an increase in sales of 10% compared to last year, a better performance than many [retail shops across the country](#).



Garlic & Oil and Ava and Jack Children's Boutique in White Deer Plaza, Sparta, New Jersey

2020 was supposed to be a banner year for Casa Mia, purchased by Pugliese in 1995. He had planned a 25-year anniversary celebration for the fall season that had to be canceled given the [Governor's reversal on indoor gatherings](#). While the shop only closed for a few weeks in March, between then and June the business lost up to 30% of sales. In addition, Casa Mia's extensive catering business saw a rise in costs of up to 15%, due in part to the need to package products as individual servings instead of using common trays. Pugliese did not pass those costs on to his customers. "I was working for free," the owner said.



Casa Mia's catering offerings are now provided in individual servings.

Casa Mia sales returned to normal levels over the summer, in part due to residential delivery and business catering. While high-tech companies like [Amazon have only recently offered same day delivery for a fee of over \\$12](#), pizzerias have been delivering their products for no charge, in under an hour, for decades. Casa Mia's rebound is consistent with other food delivery businesses nationwide.



Casa Mia outer kitchen, with owner Mike Pugliese, 62, and employee Bob Ingala, 71, who handles deliveries, Sparta, New Jersey.

Walking into White Deer Liquor Store, established in 1965 by Caccavale's father and a partner, is like a scene from the Twilight Zone. Little to nothing has changed inside, while the outside world has been turned upside down by the pandemic. Its owner, who has worked at the store since he was 10 years-old, was very intentional about that. "It was clear to me that my customers wanted the same store they have been visiting for the past 10 or 20 or 30 years," Caccavale said. "And I'm more than happy to provide that."

[Consistent with similar businesses across the country](#), the liquor store experienced increased sales during the height of the pandemic. Part of this is due to the inherent nature of drinking – [people consume more in times of stress](#). Caccavale's business also has some unique features that helped in managing the pandemic. First, the store has only two employees, so social distancing was not an issue for workers or for most of his customers. In addition, Caccavale has provided curbside delivery for decades. This proved critical during March and April when the pandemic, and customers' concerns, were at their height. [Many businesses are now offering the same service](#). The old has become new again.



Kathryn Kaplan, Mike Pugliese and George Caccavale, White Deer Plaza business owners, left to right respectfully, Sparta, New Jersey

Having caught their collective breath, the business owners are now left with the impossible task of estimating how long the pandemic will last, and whether it will get worse before it gets better. Perhaps the owners' concerns are similar to those faced by business owners in White Deer Plaza in 1929 with the onset of the Great Depression. For perspective, that tragedy lasted 10 years.

Despite an uncertain future, there is hope, if not optimism. For Kaplan, approximately 60% of her sales happen between November and January, so a healthy fall and winter would put her stores on a much stronger footing.

Pugliese also expressed some hope. "We are approaching 25 years in business," Pugliese said, "I really want to put up a banner that says CASA MIA 25, COVID 19." White Deer Plaza by a touchdown!

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